Source: Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5
(author's notes removed for the sake of formating, my apologies)
By Kizaki Kaya

The 49th Name

Running a hand over his flame-like red hair, the boy slowly closed his left eye, the one not concealed by an eyepatch.

In that instant, the darkness arrived.

In the lightless, pitch-black world, a grave voice asked, "Who are you?"

The boy quietly answered within his heart. *The one who will succeed the Bookman.*

"Who is the Bookman?"

The Bookman is a spectator to history, and its chronicler. He records the secret history of the world and passes it on to future generations.

The Bookman's role was to travel to every place in existence, lingering in no one location, but wandering, to emblazon history on his vision and record what he'd seen.

"What must a Bookman be like?"

He must not become attached or be controlled by emotion. He speaks with all kinds of people, then leaves as if nothing has happened.

Emotion was unnecessary to chroniclers. They need only record things as they are, without getting their emotions mixed in.

"I will ask you this once. Who are you?"

The Bookman's successor. I take on a new name each time I go somewhere new, and discard it each time I leave.

Right now I'm also an Exorcist of the Black Order. My current name is—

"Rabi!"

Rabi opened his left eye to see an old man of small stature in loose Chinese-style clothes standing in the doorway. The old man's sparse hair was gathered at the crown of his head, and his sharp eyes, which held a strange luster, were surrounded by black makeup. Although his strange appearance would draw

anyone’s eye, he possessed an innate air that let him effortlessly blend in anywhere.

The old man was the current Bookman. And Rabi’s master.

“We have work. Start preparing for departure.”

It seemed that the Black Order had contacted them about a new mission.

A fierce battle over the fate of the world was presently unfolding between the Millennium Earl, who was trying to lead the world to destruction, and the Black Order, a military body under the direct control of the Vatican. Rabi was in the Black order as an Exorcist, along with his master, so that the Bookman could record the secret workings of history.

Exorcists were the only ones who could counter Akuma, the weapons the Millennium Earl made to destroy mankind. Exorcists were chosen by the mysterious matter called Innocence, which they could control. Because Innocence was also called “God’s crystals,” Exorcists were sometimes known as “God’s apostles.”

God’s messenger, huh? It doesn’t suit me. Rabi smiled faintly.

“What is it, Rabi?”

“Oh, nothing.”

There were no more than twenty Exorcists in the Black Order at present. They were sent out all over the world without a moment’s rest.

Rabi shrugged into the black uniform that was the sign of an Exorcist. When he wore this uniform, he became an Exorcist. Although he remained the Bookman’s apprentice in truth. “Now then, where to this time?”

“France.”

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A boy with a slight build stared unmoving in a single direction, letting the wind toy with his black hair. Not a single stain marred his white uniform, as if showing the purity of his heart. His back straight, he watched the entrance to town intently, like a loyal dog waiting for his master to return.

“He sure hasn’t changed…” Rabi said under his breath as he watched the boy from afar.

The boy’s name was Doug. He was in the Black Order as a Finder, charged with

gathering information. Doug, who had come to Elysee, a town very close to Paris, to investigate uncanny rumors, had determined that there was a high probability an Akuma was involved, and requested Exorcists' support from the Black Order. That's what had brought Rabi and his master rushing out.

"What is it, Rabi?" Beside Rabi, the Bookman had stopped suddenly and was looking up at him questioningly.

"Old man, you wait here for a sec." Having called his master an old man, Rabi snuck towards Doug.

Finders traveled the world seeking information about Innocence and the Millennium Earl, a job that came with constant dangers. No few Finders had fallen after coming into contact with an Akuma.

In other words, Doug's nerves must be stretched taught, since he was in the middle of a mission. Rabi gently grasped the hammer that was his weapon. The hammer, which could grow or shrink at will, grew visibly larger.

Perhaps sensing something, Doug turned swiftly. His blue eyes opened wide. "Rabi!"

Rabi swung his hammer down the moment Doug spoke. He felt it hit.

"Ow!"

Rabi grinned at Doug, who was clutching his head with an expression of pain. "Doug, carelessness is forbidden! If you call yourself a Finder, you've always got to watch your back."

"That was mean," said Doug. "We meet for the first time in a long while, and suddenly you do this?"

"Sorry, sorry. You know, if you shrink any more, you'll look like a grade schooler."

There was a fifteen centimeter difference in height between Rabi and Doug, who stood at a mere 162 centimeters. Or, in the British reckoning, a difference of six inches, with Doug five foot three. Rabi looked down at Doug and patted his head, at which Doug glared back. However, there was little force behind his glare. Not with Doug's round-eyed child's face.

"You're sure dense for a Finder." Rabi was patting Doug's shoulder and laughing when he sensed a baleful presence behind him."

"Ha!"

Rabi had no time to turn around, but took a forceful kick to the back and went

head over heels.

“Stop fooling around, foolish pupil. We have to start working.”

Rabi rolled like a poorly spun top until he smacked into a wall. He stood up covered in dust. “You didn’t have to kick me!” he yelled in protest. But the Bookman was no longer even looking in his direction. Rabi gazed reproachfully at the Bookman and Doug, who were facing each other.

“It’s been a long time, Bookman.” Standing tall and straight, Doug bowed his head deeply.

The Bookman nodded slightly in acknowledgement. “It has been awhile, Doug. I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“You’re doing the best of all, old man,” muttered Rabi disconsolately as he brushed off his uniform.

“At any rate, you must be tried from your long journey,” said Doug. “Why don’t you dine in a nearby tavern while I report the results of my investigation.”

Rabi gazed intently at the retreating Doug. Perfect posture and unwavering footsteps. He really hadn't changed at all since then.

No, that wasn’t true. Just a moment ago, he’d had an unworried expression and acted without reserve. When they’d first met, Doug would barely meet Rabi’s eyes. Now that seemed like the distant past.

While Rabi was reminiscing, Doug turned around. Narrowing his eyes, he gazed at Rabi. “You’re a little different, Rabi.”

For a moment, Rabi thought Doug had read his mind. “Huh? How so?”

Doug broke into a smile, and his eyes were kind. “Now you actually meet my eyes when we talk.”

“…”

Rabi recalled what Doug had said to him when Rabi had first entered the Order.

”Your eye is like glass. It reflects me, but that’s all. Nothing reaches inside.”

That must have been over a year ago.

Rabi looked down at his uniform. At some point, it had become an everyday matter for him to wear this uniform.

“This is the second time we’ve worked together, then. I look forward to it, Rabi.” Doug’s smile was as bright as a sunflower in summer.

“Yeah, same here.”

Doug smiled happily.

He sure is easy to read, thought Rabi.

Right now, Doug’s expression was filled with trust towards Rabi. It enveloped Rabi with a warmth greater than that of the sun, moving from the peak of the sky to the horizon.

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“How long has that rumor been going around?” Rabi raised his voice to keep from being drowned out.

It wasn’t even evening yet, but the tavern on the town’s main street was crowded with men who seemed to be craftsmen. It was so crowded that the slightest movement would jostle one’s neighbor. Pipe smoke and the smell of roasting meat filled the tavern, and, mixed with the sound of men’s laughing and talking, made the place swell with a fevered excitement that seemed as if it would explode at any movement.

Perhaps accustomed to it, Doug reflexively spoke in a loud voice, unfazed. “Let’s place our orders first. Is there something you’d like to eat?”

At Doug’s question, the Bookman shook his head. “No, you choose something.”

“I’m starving over here, so I’ll take anything with volume!” yelled Rabi, elbowing the Bookman aside. For a while now he’d been so hungry he’d had trouble walking.

Doug laughed and nodded, then spoke to a young woman who’d come to take their order. “What would you recommend today?”

“We have beef simmered in wine. How about a side of potatoes and kidney beans boiled in salt with that?”

Rabi’s mouth began to water just hearing her. “That sounds delicious! Five of that, then!” Considering the state of his stomach, that seemed about right.

“Five!?” came Doug’s voice.

Rabi smiled at him reassuringly. “Don’t worry, I’ll eat all of it!”

“Really? Well then, we’ll also have bread and blue cheese. And mineral water in bottles.”

Before long, their food was brought out. Bringing their glasses together slightly, Doug began speaking.

“The rumors I mentioned began one or two months ago. At this point even the town’s children know them. However, it’s unclear where they originated.”

A strange rumor had been going around this town of Elysee, situated northwest of Paris. According to the rumor, if you prayed to the “Statue of the Dawn Goddess” within the forest on the outskirts of town, one who had died would miraculously come back to life.

Rabi considered the reports he’d heard at the Order as he tore off pieces of bread and steadily popped them in his mouth. The fresh-baked bread was crisp on the outside, but soft on the inside, making it smooth on the tongue.

“Have you gone to see this supposed goddess statue?”

At the Bookman’s question, Doug took on a downcast expression and shook his head. “My apologies. I asked as many people as I could, but I’ve yet to find anyone who knows its precise location. I’ve also gone into the forest to search for it, but there are a number of scattered overgrown gardens that could contain the goddess statue, and I can’t identify which statue is the one.”

“I see….However, you’ve called us Exorcists. You must have found something related to Innocence and the Millennium Earl?” asked the Bookman.

“Yes. Without a doubt, there’s something going on in this town. That is, an unusual number of people have gone missing in the past month.”

“Which is?”

“Fourteen, and those are just the ones I’ve confirmed myself,” said Doug.

“Which comes to approximately one person every two days…” said the Bookman.

“Besides, that’s just counting the residents of Elysee. Since it’s so close to Paris, people are always coming and going. It could be that other people, not just residents of Elysee, are vanishing. The truth is, I’ve heard numerous stories of visitors leaving their lodgings without telling anyone and never coming back.”

“I see…” said the Bookman with a thoughtful expression.

Rabi watched him intently, still ceaselessly moving food to his mouth. The beef, well-simmered, was tender. Rabi lost himself in the faint scent of the wine, and the

flavor that filled his mouth.

Trying to spear another piece with his fork, Rabi's hand slipped.

Oh damn.

The piece of meat sent flying smacked into the Bookman's face.

Rabi tried to apologize, but it was too late. The Bookman's fist hit the top of Rabi's head at the speed of light. The force was enough to make Rabi see stars.

"You are too much. Are you even listening!?" roared the Bookman, plucking off the meat slipping down his face in annoyance.

Clutching his head, Rabi looked at the Bookman reproachfully. *He moves so fast. I have no time to apologize or dodge.* "Damn geezer!"

"Did you say something?" The look in the Bookman's eyes as he turned to glare at Rabi was quite frightening.

Rabi straightened up. "I was too listening! He was saying how a lot of people have disappeared, right? But this town's so close to Paris so wouldn't a lot of guys be casually heading out for fun or work? The circumstances don't seem that suspicious to me."

"Hmm…" said the Bookman.

It was common knowledge that, for a number of years, people from the country and foreigners from Germany and other countries had been surging in in search of work, abruptly swelling the population of Paris. Rabi's remark was right on target, and the Bookman fell silent.

Doug said, "It's certainly possible that all those things are unrelated to this case. However, I heard another rumor that can't be ignored."

"What?" asked Rabi.

Doug started to open his mouth, but instead glanced at the adjacent table. "Perfect…please listen to the conversation of men next to us for a moment."

The two men—who seemed to be fellow laborers—spoke loudly, and it wasn't hard to overhear them.

"Oh yeah, you hear that Dreselle guy was wandering around in the middle of the night?"

"Dreselle?" The young man, who looked to be about twenty, looked at the older

man with a stupefied expression.

The well-built older man, who seemed to be the leader, nodded. He had sharp eyes and a strong sense of presence. “It’s no wonder you don’t know, seeing as you’ve just left the sticks. I’m talkin’ about the richest guy in town. Jerome Dreselle. One o’ them ‘bourgeoisie.’ He’s in the business of tailoring suits for gentlemen, and made loads of money. Besides his huge mansion, he’s got a summer home—he’s livin’ in style. There’s a guy who lives in a different world than guys like us, livin’ in a cramped attic room and workin’ for a living.”

“What a lucky guy…I sew ten hours a day and feel lucky when I finally come by a decent meal.” The young man sighed deeply.

“Y’know, I wouldn’t call him lucky. I hear his wife died a month ago, and he shut himself in his mansion and never came out.”

A month ago. Rabi involuntarily glanced at Doug. Doug nodded silently.

“But I heard he walks aimlessly around town at night,” said the young worker. “I wonder what’s going on.”

“And his only son isn’t the reliable sort, either.”

“Serge, you mean. He was this close to his mother, so for awhile there he went mad. He’d get drunk and stagger about town, but sounds like he finally calmed down.”

“Sounds like no more than some idiot son whose only talent is squanderin’ money away.” The older man laughed scornfully.

“They don’t have as many servants now either. Now there’s only that small maid they say came from Paris.”

“Oh, that girl? She’s got an even more severe look on her face, too, since the wife died,” remarked the older man.

“There’s a kid who never acted like a child. Now when I pass her on the street, I’m too scared to speak to her.” He faked a frightened expression, and the people around him laughed.

“Women are scary even when they’re small.”

Doug glanced sidelong at the laughing men, and said “As you can see, the rumor is spreading through town. A month ago, Jerome Dreselle lost his wife and shut himself in his room. It seems his son Serge was quite out of control. Furthermore, although I became aware of this just now, there’s also been a change in the maid. Just before or after the incident, rumors began of a “Statue of the Dawn Goddess”

that brings the dead back to life. Factor in the many missing persons, and is it unnatural to link these three points to Akuma?”

Akuma were malevolent weapons forged from tragedies.

The Millennium Earl and his messengers brought sweet temptation to mourners who had lost a loved one. Clinging to the jest that they could bring the dead back to life, the mourner called the dead one’s name—and everything went straight to hell.

The soul called back by a loved one is imprisoned in a skeleton made from Dark Matter, then forces itself in to the body of the one who called it back. It’s the worst possible outcome: nobody is saved, neither the dead person nor the one who called them back.

What’s left has been reduced to the Earl’s toy, one of his killing machines, and Akuma. Even worse, in a wicked touch, the Akuma is unrecognizable as such because it wears human skin.

The Bookman nodded slightly. “The wife’s death, a household that has lost a loved one, and rumors of a dead person being brought back to life. Not to mention a great many people gone missing—everything started a month ago. Let us go to the crux of the rumors, the Dreselle mansion, first.”

“Thank you,” said Doug.

The Bookman stood and looked sharply at Rabi. “Rabi.”

“I know.” Rabi set down his fork and looked up at the Bookman.

In light of the information they’d heard so far, there was a good chance of an Akuma being close to Jerome. The visit to his mansion could turn into a battle. Meaning Rabi must not relax his guard.

Man, the panda is such a worrywart. Rabi smiled wryly as he looked at the black makeup bordering the Bookman’s eyes. *I won’t slip up. I know that anyone could be an Akuma, anytime, anywhere.*

Rabi felt the depths of his mind becoming clear.

“Well then, let’s go,” declared the Bookman.

Doug nodded to him and stood.

Nerves on edge, the three of them left the still-bustling tavern.

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“It’s this way. You’ll be able to tell when we’re close.”

Under Doug’s direction, Rabi’s group headed towards Jerome Dreselle’s mansion.

“I see…” Rabi murmured without thinking.

He certainly could tell they were close. They’d come in sight of a section distinctly different from the streets they’d been walking through. Visible in the center of the row of plain, wood-frame buildings that lined the street was an arched gate, shining golden in the setting sun. Rabi could make out the elegant ornamentation done in a plant motif.

“What a spectacular mansion…!” Rabi exclaimed in admiration once they stood before the gate.

A grand mansion that looked to have seen a fair number of years rose imposingly in the center of a spacious garden with statues placed here and there. Like the gate, the doors and window frames bore elaborately wrought designs, making the mansion so impressive as to overwhelm the viewer.

When they rang the doorbell next to the gate, a slightly built girl came out of the mansion. She wore a white apron over a long navy-blue dress. A maid’s outfit. This must be the girl mentioned in the bar.

The girl slowly approached the gate, making her chestnut-colored hair, gathered in two pigtails, sway. Her face held no childlike innocence, only a tense severity.

“Who might you be?” the girl asked coldly from the other side of the latticed gate. Her large brown eyes were filled with suspicion.

“We’re envoys from the Vatican. Are you the maid of this mansion?” Doug asked gently. How like the earnest Doug to show perfect sincerity even to a child.

“Yes, I am,” replied the girl without averting her eyes from Doug.

Although it’s what he’d imagined, on second glance she was truly young and small.

“How old are you?” Rabi asked unthinkingly. She was shorter than the Bookman, her limbs as delicate as a tree’s. The girl before them couldn’t be more than eight.

“I’m ten, but tomorrow I’ll be eleven. What business might you have here?” the girl replied indifferently. Behind her firm, dignified manner was a force that would cause even adults to falter. Certainly, as the men in the tavern had said, she was quite strong for her age.

“We wish to meet with Jerome Dreselle…”

“The master is not well. He is not seeing anyone,” the girl said flatly, without hesitation. It was clear from her tone that she’d already been through this exchange countless times. “Please leave. Now, if you will excuse me.” On that note, the girl turned her back without asking why they’d come.

Flustered, Doug grabbed the bars of the gate and called, “Uh…please wait a moment!”

“Colette! Do we have guests?” At that moment, a young man emerged from the mansion and headed their way.

“Master Serge.” The girl, whom he’d called Colette, looked at the young man in surprise.

Serge—then he must be this house’s only son. Rabi observed the tall young man closely. He couldn’t have been much past twenty. He had curly blond hair and sky-blue eyes. His cheeks were smooth and white, like a girl’s. In his finely tailored tailcoat, he looked like a young nobleman. Even the gracefulness of the composed way he walked toward them showed his good upbringing.

Doug looked at Serge with a nervous expression. He was probably desperate to keep them from being turned away at the gate this time.

“I was watching from the second-story window…I wondered if perhaps…” Serge turned his eyes to Rabi’s chest. “It is the Rose Cross! Are you gentlemen from the Black Order?”

Doug, looking relieved, nodded. “Yes, we are. We came by in hopes of being allowed to speak with Master Jerome, you see…”

“Did you now! However, I’m afraid my father is not feeling well…but I will speak with you if you’d like.”

At this unprompted offer, Doug nodded. “We would, thank you!”

“Colette, open the gate.”

Prompted by Serge, the still expressionless Colette unlocked the gate.

“I’ll show the guests in, so you go on ahead and prepare the tea,” said Serge.

“Yes, sir.” Colette nodded in consent and hurried for the mansion.

“I’m sorry. She’s quite an unfriendly girl.”

“But she’s what, only ten? Why take such a young girl as a maid?” Rabi asked, following Serge to the mansion.

Serge gave a wry smile at his blunt question. “Last year, her father, who sews at a factory in Paris, fell sick. He was also badly in debt, and as we had subcontracted to him before, we couldn’t stand idly by. We lent him money. As he had no chance of paying us back, his only daughter Colette came to work as our maid.”

“I see…”

It wasn’t unusual for children to work if their household was in those straits. In Paris and other large cities, poverty and the problems accompanying it were currently increasing. Some held that the conditions of poverty were more severe in the cities than in the farming villages. Harsh working conditions pressured the family budget, and no few homes had been destroyed. The gap between the poor and wealthy classes like the aristocracy and bourgeoisie grew ever wider.

“But she’s so young, it must be difficult for her…” A shadow crossed Doug’s face. His heart must be aching in sympathy for the unfortunate girl. Doug was a superb Finder, but he was easily swayed by emotion.

Honestly, he’s so naïve.

That was his strength, and his weakness.

“Ouch!” Rabi felt a small pain in his butt and turned around. The Bookman, an acupuncture needle in his hand, was looking at him with a frightening expression.

“What was that for, Panda?”

“The conversation went off course when you butted in. Keep your mouth shut for awhile,” whispered the Bookman quietly.

Doug deftly continued the conversation and began probing for information in place of Rabi, who reluctantly kept his mouth shut. “But to pay the debt to the sewing factory on another’s behalf, your father must be a very thoughtful individual.”

Serge smiled, pleased. “Yes…I respect him. After my mother passed away, no end of worried callers came to pay a visit to my father. Unfortunately, he has been bedridden due to illness. Come in.” Serge opened the mansion door for them.

An open space spread before the three visitors. It was clear that no expense had been spared for the entryway. Countless portraits decorated the walls. The candlesticks and other decorations were all of fine craftsmanship.

However, the floor was dusty, the interior dimly lit. There was only one maid for such a large mansion, and she couldn’t manage to clean everything.

Rabi sensed a bleakness to the mansion that at first sight had seemed blessed.

“Please, this way…”

The drawing room to which Serge showed them was also spacious. Treading the soft carpet, the three of them took their seats on the velvet sofa.

Colette promptly brought in tea. Arranged on the snow-white tablecloth was fine china with a pattern of climbing roses.

“Ooh, thanks. That smells good.” Rabi tried speaking to her, but Colette remained silent.

Doug watched Colette silently completing her tasks, looking as if he wanted to speak to her. He was probably recalling what he’d heard about her life.

The Bookman looked at Doug, urging him to act. Doug noticed his gaze and hurriedly composed his expression. It seemed that, as before, the role of asking questions would fall to Doug.

Doug, his good humor renewed, cleared his throat slightly and faced Serge with a calm smile. “I apologize for our visiting so suddenly. We’re from the Black Order, and at present we’re investigating the mysterious “Statue of the Dawn Goddess” we recently heard was in this town. We hoped to speak with Mr. Jerome, a figure of local prominence.”

“Statue of the Dawn Goddess…oh yes, we did receive a visitor. A suspicious fellow who was a traveling fortune-teller or some such.” Serge grimaced, as if to say he’d been revolted.

“You met with the fortune-teller? What was he like?”

“He wore a black hood low over his eyes, so I couldn’t see his face very well. However, I could tell he was a strongly built man in the prime of his life. I carelessly invited him inside because at first he said he’d come to offer his condolences. But once I began listening to him closely, he started saying something questionable about how you could bring the dead back to life if you pray to the goddess statue. He must have gotten wind of my mother’s passing away. The likes of these swindlers truly have sharp ears.” Serge’s white cheeks became visibly red with anger. It seemed he was prone to excitement in temperament. “What do they think a person’s death is? How could they make a business of that!?”

“You didn’t believe him, then.”

At Doug’s words, Serge’s sky-blue eyes widened in mortification. “Of course not.

Did he think he was a god, saying the dead could be brought back to life? He seemed suspicious from the moment I saw him. He wore a black hooded cloak that hid his entire body and face, and he was accompanied by an eerie bat. He was like the specter of Death."

Doug and his companions looked at each other. A suspicious fortune-teller—could it be that man?

Traveling the world far and wide, continuing to create grotesque toys, and trying to lead the world to destruction—the Millennium Earl?

"Did you hear where the Statue of the Dawn Goddess is located?"

"No, I didn't, because I turned him out," Serge said with finality.

"So you don't know where it is, and haven't gone to see it?"

"No! That's what I'm saying!" Serge set his cup down violently, with a thump. Tea splashed out, and brown stains appeared, spotting the tablecloth. "I'm sorry. I became flustered."

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

At Doug's words, Serge looked down. His long eyelashes trembled, and he pressed his lips tightly together. He seemed to be fighting back tears.

"My mother was a kind person…she always had a smile. She passed away a month ago, but when I think of her death I still feel a tightness in my chest…how pathetic I must be."

"No, not at—"

Serge slowly shook his head. His golden curls swayed. "Just when I have to be strong. It was a shock to my father, and he's stayed shut up in his room. It seems to be more a problem of the mind than the body. A physician said the only thing we can do right now is leave him be, so I'm considering convalescence at our summer home." Serge sighted.

"By the way, what are you doing now, Serge?"

A note of bewilderment appeared on Serge's face, as if Doug had asked him something unexpected. "Me? I'm currently training to take over my father's business."

So you aren't at home often?" asked Doug.

"That's right. Sometimes I look over documents at home, but …I'm often out of the

house.” When talking about himself, Serge, was inarticulate.

Rabi observed Serge intently. Either he didn’t much want to talk to outsiders, or there were details he found it difficult to talk about.

In the tavern, the townsfolk had talked about him as if he were a prodigal son living a debauched life. Right now, he seemed like a young man who cared for his father and applied himself to his work. Which was his true self?

“Master Serge.” Colette quietly approached Serge. “The Baron Lebrun is here wishing to meet with the master.”

“Again? My father remains unwell. Turn him away!”

“Yes, sir…” Colette nodded with a gloomy expression and left the room.

Serge, not hiding his ill temper, irritably clutched the arms of his chair. “I apologize for raising my voice. Since my father became unwell, there’s been no end to the people coming saying they want to buy the diamond. The must think that they can seize their chance now, while my father’s weak. They’re like vultures.”

“Um…what diamond is this?”

Taken aback, Serge looked at Doug. “Excuse me, I expect visitors who aren’t from the area wouldn’t know about it. I was referring to the diamond pendant passed down from generation to generation in the Dreselle family.” Serge rose and stood before the fireplace.

Above the fireplace hung a portrait. With even the fine details drawn in, it was so lifelike it looked as if it would start moving at any moment. A notable artist must have drawn it.

The portrait depicted a man in his prime with sky-blue eyes that shone with a strong light. He wore a tailcoat and sported a brown mustache. It could have been his highly imposing figure that put Rabi in mind of an unmoving rock.

“This is a portrait of my father Jerome.”

So they were, unexpectedly, able to see Jerome. The jewel shining silver at his lapel drew Rabi’s eye.

“He’s wearing the diamond pendant at his breast,” said Serge.

“That’s an amazing pendant. How many carats is it?” Rabi looked at Serge. Perhaps it was his nature as an apprentice chronicler, but he couldn’t help being interested in numbers.

Serge swelled out his chest with a hint of pride. “It’s nearly 300 carats.”

“That is amazing,” said Doug in an impressed tone.

“It’s true that diamonds of this size are rare…but if it were merely a diamond, it wouldn’t be coveted this much. This pendant is known as “The Diamond of Good Fortune.” Apparently the business affairs of the Dreselle family kept improving steadily after obtaining the diamond.”

“A diamond that brings happiness and wealth….Will you be the next to inherit it, Serge?”

“Yes, I will. Since I’m the only son.” Serge became absorbed in staring at the diamond depicted in the portrait.

So the diamond, a treasure with great property value said to bring good fortune, was supposed to become Serge’s, and that was why he was so high-strung.

“I apologize for such dull and boastful talk.” Serge came back to the sofa and stared at the tabletop. “Oh, there’s no more tea. Colette!” he yelled in the direction of the door.

“You don’t have any servants besides that Colette girl?” asked Rabi. Judging by the scale of the mansion, it would need at least five or six servants.

The Bookman glared at Rabi, but didn’t say anything this time. Either he’d given up, or Rabi hadn’t digressed from the main subject.

“No, not at present. My father started losing his temper, and one after another the servants took time off…”

“Does that mean that Colette is Jerome’s favorite?” asked Rabi.

“That’s right. My father pitied her in her misfortune and came to care for her.”

“I’m sure your mother treated Colette with affection as well,” said Doug nonchalantly. He must have recalled the rumors that Colette had changed after the wife’s death. There was not a zero possibility that she was an Akuma.

“Yes, she did.”

“Then your mother’s death must have been a shock to her as well.”

“Yes. But as you saw, well, she’s a brave child, and didn’t break down.”

“Really…” Doug looked at Rabi as if to check his reaction. Rabi nodded slightly.

They'd come to a good stopping point for now.

Doug, giving a friendly smile, stood up. "Thank you for speaking with us despite being so busy. We're staying in town to investigate, so we may visit you if something comes up again."

"I see. If something does come up, I shall try to inform you…where are you staying?"

"We haven't chosen tonight's lodging yet. I'll come tomorrow to let you know where we're staying."

"I see. I may be out, in which case please leave a message with Colette."

"I will. Please excuse us." Strongly declining Serge's offer to see them to the gate, the three of them left the mansion behind them.

Once they were outside, Rabi stretched. "In the tavern, Serge was called an idiot son, but when we met with him he seemed relatively decent."

"I wonder…" murmured Doug.

"You don't think so?"

"Weeell, his eyes bother me."

"His eyes?"

"They say the eyes are the mirror of the soul. Without a doubt it's the eyes where people's true feelings show through the most. I can tell a person's mental state by looking at their eyes."

"That reminds me, you said that before…"

When Rabi had just entered the Order, no matter how hard Rabi tried to speak to Doug, he refused to look at Rabi's face, as if Rabi were annoying him.

When Rabi persisted despite this, Doug told him clearly, "Your eyes are like glass. You interact with people only as reflections, without showing your true heart at all. I can't imagine having a proper conversation with someone like that."

Even that dispute was now a pleasant memory.

"Serge's eyes were like clouded glass." Becoming one of the Finders charged with investigation and information gathering must have honed his innate abilities, but Doug's keen bowers of discernment were astonishing.

“So you mean Serge was lying?”

“No…but he wanted to hide something for certain. He was friendly, but his gaze drifted insecurely here and there. Although there’s a possibility that it wasn’t because we’re from the Black Order, but simply because he was wary of sudden visitors.”

“Now that you mention it, he did seem pretty emotionally unstable. Besides which, he said his father was shut in the house. That’s different from the rumor in the tavern.”

“The staggering about at night could have been sleepwalking. Serge could be unaware of it because he’s sleeping at night,” said Doug.

“How about Colette?”

“She’s completely closed off her heart…but I don’t know yet whether or not that’s because of her cruel childhood.”

“Man, at this point everyone’s suspicious.” All aspects of the case lacked conclusive evidence. A sigh escaped Rabi.

“That’s true. If we could meet with Mister Jerome, we might find out more. Also, I’d sure like to hear what Colette has to say. As a maid, she might possess some secret information about the mansion.”

“Well, speak of the devil,” said Rabi. He turned his eyes towards the gate. Colette had indeed just come outside. When she noticed them, she stopped short. She must have thought they’d already left.

“Hey. Thanks for the delicious tea earlier.” Smiling so as not to frighten her, Doug approached her.

But Colette was looking at them like a guard dog that’s seen a thief.

At any rate, it seemed she didn’t have a favorable impression of them. Rabi was tempted to let out a sigh.

Not giving up, Doug spoke to Colette. “Do you mind if we speak with you for a moment?”

“…It’s a bad time. I have to go shopping.”

“We would like you to cooperate with our investigation so we can solve this case. Please.”

“I’m in a hurry.”

Rabi intently watched Colette, who was shaking her head stubbornly. She may be unfriendly, but she was such a small girl who seemed to be harmless. She had a conflicted expression, but inside she might be sticking out her tongue. Wearing human skin and living like a normal human, then suddenly baring its fangs—that was the terror of Akuma.

I’ll find out right here. Rabi quietly took hold of the hammer hanging at his belt. The hammer looked like a small mallet, but in an instant its handle lengthened and its head grew.

Colette gaped up at Rabi, who was suddenly holding a large hammer.

“Rabi!? What are you doing?”

Rabi flashed a grin toward the flustered Doug. “I’m clearing up whether or not she’s an Akuma.”

At this point, the most suspicious was Jerome Dreselle. But there was a fair possibility that Colette, stubbornly refusing to cooperate, was also an Akuma. They had to find out if she was at once.

Doug cried out in what was nearly a scream. “Rabi, stop!”

Squish.

There was a dull sound, and the hammer sank into the earth. It was only a few inches away from Colette’s feet.

“Oh. You’re human.” Rabi pulled the hammer out of the earth and regarded Colette, who was frozen on the spot and trembling.

He heard Doug let out a deep breath beside him.

Rabi said, “Sorry to scare you. I thought it’d be faster if I did that and checked if —”

A sudden blow to the back of the head sent Rabi pitching forward.

“Ouch! What are you doing!?” Rabi turned around, clutching his head, to see Doug standing with his fist clenched, and expression of indignant rage on his face.

“How could you do such a thing to such a small girl!”

“I never intended to hit Colette in the fist place! I just wanted to check if she’s an Akuma.”

“There are other ways of doing that! You’re too much!”

At that moment, Rabi caught another, ominous sound.

It seemed Doug had heard it too, for still grasping Rabi’s lapels he turned to look at Colette with trepidation.

Colette was clutching her skirt, tears running down her face as she sobbed.

“Aaaugh! You made her cry!”

Perhaps in reaction to Doug’s words, Colette began to wail. “Waaah!”

“Gah! What should we do, old man!?” Rabi sought help from his master, the Bookman. At some point the Bookman had drifted a number of meters away and was looking off in another direction as if to show he had nothing to do with them.

(Insert Art)

“Doooug!” When Rabi turned back, he saw Doug kneeling in front of Colette.

“I’m sorry I let him surprise you. I won’t ever let him do that again.” Doug took a handkerchief from his pocket and softly dabbed at the huge tears running down Colette’s cheeks.

“I’m really sorry, Colette!” Rabi put his palms together fervently.

Still sobbing and sniffling, Colette looked at Doug. Her terror made her look her age, like the young girl she was.

Doug continued carefully wiping Colette’s face. “I’m sorry we scared you. We won’t do anything that bothers you again, so is it all right if we accompany you while you do your shopping?”

“Why?” Colette asked in bewilderment.

“We’d at least like to carry your things for you as an apology. How’s that?”

Colette was staring at Doug, sniffling, but eventually she nodded. “...That’s fine.”

“Great! Man, for a moment there I was worried.” Rabi wiped the sweat off his forehead. Good thing he’d left things to Doug. Children often liked Doug, possibly because they saw through to his good-hearted, loving nature.

At that moment, Rabi felt a gaze as cold as ice. Colette pointed a finger at Rabi as if training a gun on him. “But I hate him. I hate that person with the eyepatch!”

There was force behind her words.

“What!? That’s mean, Colette! Look, I’m sorry! When we arrive in town, I’ll buy you anything you like, so forgive me!”

Colette pointedly turned her face away despite his heartfelt entreaty. Rabi put his hands together and peeked at her face in trepidation. “Will you forgive me?”

“No!”

“What!?” Rabi cried in despair.

When they finally reached the town center, the sun had completely set, but the night had just begun, and a range of shops were lit up and bustling.

“C’mon, Colette, cheer up.” Rabi had eventually received permission to accompany them, so he’d left keeping watch on the mansion to the Bookman, but Colette wouldn’t let him get near her, leaving Rabi to trudge behind her and Doug all the way into town.

“Hey, Eyepatch.”

“My name’s Rabi!”

Undaunted by Rabi’s words, Colette directed a gaze at him that was blunt enough to make him flinch. “Why do you wear an eyepatch over your right eye? An injury?”

A tension in the air immediately became palpable.

Feeling Doug’s gaze on him, Rabi forced a smile. “Oh…this? No, this—it’s not an injury.”

Colette may have perceptively caught the change in atmosphere, for she said, flustered, “Oh, really. That’s good then.”

“You were worried about me? You’re a nice kid, Colette.”

She dodged Rabi’s hand as he reached out to pat her head, then held out a handful of money. “I don’t have time. Let’s split up the shopping. Could you go buy bread, Eyepatch? Doug, you go to the butcher’s please.”

“I told you, my name’s—”

“Come now, hurry up and go shopping!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Smiling wryly, Rabi headed off to buy bread.

It had been awhile since anyone had asked about his eyepatch. People who'd met him for the first time regarded it curiously, but refrained from asking him about it. Colette had a child's outspokenness.

People must imagine all sorts of things about Rabi's right eye, but they would never have imagined that it was what had determined that he would become the next Bookman.

This was the truth known only to the Bookman. What nobody else needed to know.

Nobody else—

Rabi shivered slightly. For some reason the autumn wind felt colder.

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"Thank you for carrying my things." Colette thanked them timidly once they'd finished shopping and arrived before the mansion.

Doug gave a gentle, enveloping smile and handed Colette a bottle of wine. "Is Mr. Jerome treating you well?"

"Huh?" Colette looked at him questioningly.

"I was just worried…I mean, even a single shopping trip is hard on you." Doug looked at Colette in concern.

"I'm grateful to the master. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't provided the treatment fee, saying it was because he'd subcontracted to my father before," Colette answered, making Doug to smile in relief.

"So he's a kind person, then."

"The mistress was also a wonderful person. Because I couldn't go to school, she taught me reading, writing, and arithmetic. She and the master were very close. That's why he's so depressed…" Colette took on a pained expression. She must also have been suffering over the sudden death of her mistress and change in her master.

"Did you know that Mr. Jerome is going out at night?" asked Doug.

Colette immediately averted her eyes. To tell or not to tell? She looked conflicted. "…I have heard him leaving his room."

"Do you know where he's going?"

"No. When I notice a noise, I go to look, but I never see him."

“Really…” Doug took a backward glance at Rabi. Rabi nodded slightly.

It seemed he’d been prowling here and there outside at night as the rumors said after all.

“…I do have one idea of where the master might be going,” Colette said, sounding as if she’d made up her mind.

“Where?”

“A man claiming to be a traveling fortune-teller visited the master while he was mourning his deceased wife. Master Serge chased him out, but…it could be that the master is going to the Statue of the Dawn Goddess. After all, they said that if you pray there fervently, a person who’s died will come back to life…”

“I see.”

If Jerome was going out at night, he could be transforming into an Akuma and attacking people.

“I have to go now.” Colette glanced at the mansion.

“I’m sorry to take up your time. I’m very glad I could speak with you. Well then, we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes…goodnight.” Colette looked a little as if she wanted to say something more, but she kept silent and entered the mansion.

Doug had been watching her leave intently. Rabi grabbed his hair. “You’ve sure made a friend.”

“It did seem like she was opening up a little.”

“Yeah, kids sure get along well with each other.”

“Who are you calling a kid!” Doug swiftly shook off Rabi’s hand and walked towards the Bookman, who was standing by the gate.

“Welcome back. There were a number of visitors, but Serge turned all but one of them away at the gate. Only a single man who looked like a laborer entered the mansion, and nobody, including Jerome, left it.”

“I see. Thank you for keeping watch, Bookman. I spoke with Colette, and it seems Mr. Jerome may be visiting the Statue of the Dawn Goddess after dark.”

“I see…well then, I suppose we’ll continue to keep watch.”

“Yes, sir.” Doug’s gaze flickered towards the mansion.

“Are you worried about Colette?”

When Rabi spoke to him, Doug jumped. “Yeah, I am. I mean, she’s still only ten, but she’s shouldered her father’s debt and is working….She seems to be bearing up well, but when I think of how lonely she must be in an unfamiliar place, separated from her parents…” Doug looked down sadly. His heart must ache to think of Colette’s situation.

“…You aren’t thinking that you’d like to do something for Colette, are you?”

Doug looked at Rabi with a start.

“I knew it.”

It seemed like something Doug would be thinking. Doug was clearly thinking beyond the mission and was concerned about Colette.

Doug gave a long sigh. However, a strong resolve welled up in his eyes. “But I can’t just leave her like this.”

The Bookman, who had been silently listening, looked up at Doug. “I do understand how you feel. However, if you concern yourself any more than necessary with the people you meet in the course of your work, you won’t be able to bear it. We aren’t all-powerful gods.”

At the Bookman’s words, Doug hung his head. “I understand. But even if she’s to work, don’t you think it could wait until she’s grown more? I would like to let her attend primary school. She seems to be an intelligent child, and in France a primary education law has been enacted that allows any child up to age twelve to attend primary school.”

“That means only that the system’s been set up. Never mind that they passed the law, the system won’t be used if it goes against the way things are. If a family is destitute and can barely earn their daily bread, they won’t be able to send their children to school. Even the children will be sent out to earn money.”

“That’s true…I do understand, but when I think of such a young girl working…”

“Compared to men, women can find fewer jobs and receive lower wages. You could say that Colette is lucky just to have employment.”

Rabi lightly patted Doug’s shoulder. “Now, don’t speak so harshly, Panda. Maybe it was some kind of fate that we met Colette. If Doug performs an act of charity after the mission, the Order won’t say anything.”

Doug looked up in relief.

The Bookman nodded silently to Doug, then turned to face Rabi. “Who are you calling a panda!!”

“Gah!” An open-palmed slap with some force behind it hit Rabi’s cheek. Sent flying, Rabi grabbed onto Doug, who happened to be right next to him.

“Agh!” Hit by Rabi, who was a size larger than him, Doug staggered. Something white fell to lie at his feet.

“Sorry, Doug! …What’s this?” Rabi picked up what Doug had dropped. It was a pure-white ribbon edged with lace.

“…She said it was her birthday tomorrow, you see.”

“Ohh, so when you were shopping you secretly bought a present too! Nice work there!” Rabi nudged Doug with his elbow, and Doug’s face reddened.

“I’ve never given a present to a girl before. Do you think she’ll be happy?”

“Yeah, I’m sure she will,” Rabi said, and Doug smiled, relieved.

***

From the second-story window, two shadowy figures secretly watched the three people conversing in front of the mansion. One was Serge, and the other was a strongly built man with a savage air. He wore a homespun cap that was frayed in places low over his eyes, as if he was afraid of his face being seen. In contrast to the silk dressing gown Serge had slipped on, he cut a seedy appearance in threadbare black clothes and hempen pants.

“It’s those three,” Serge whispered to the man at his side.

Stroking the stubble of his beard, the other man gazed at Rabi and the others through the window. “Oh, I saw those three at the tavern yesterday. They stood out in their black coats of strange design. Never mind the little old man, the redhead and the black-haired kid are young and look like they could cause trouble.”

Serge clicked his tongue at the other man, who had a coarse smile on his face. “All right. How’s 200 francs for the lot of them?”

The man slowly shook his head. His expression was that of someone seeing an easy-to-manipulate sucker. “I’ll need some strong men…yeah, I’ll have to hire five or six of them. That’s not nearly enough. I’ll need 500 francs.”

“Very well.”

The man’s smile grew wider at Serge’s immediate acceptance. A handicraftsman laboring diligently for a full day could expect wages of a mere four francs. The man considered a hundred francs enough compensation, and had asked for an unreasonable price without taking it seriously.

An idiotic moneybag with no grasp of market value or basic negotiating. He wondered how long he could keep using him as a source of funds.

“However, kill all three of them,” said Serge.

“Huh?” The other man couldn’t believe his ears.

“I thought we’d talked of beating them up and running them out of town, not…”

“I changed my mind. It’s best to remove nuisances completely. I can’t have them persist in loitering outside my mansion.” His calm held absolutely no hesitation or fright towards committing murder. Serge spoke as if he wanted rocks cleared from the roadside, and even the other man, who had experienced his share of brawls, felt a surge of fear.

“But…if you just hate them hanging around, there’s no need to kill them.”

“You can’t do it?”

“Er, n-no, I can! I’ll do it.”

Serge nodded silently.

If I say no, Serge will hire some other guy. Then he’ll kill me too, so I don’t talk. Without hesitation. It will matter as little to him as crushing a bug. The man sense this acutely.

Serge handed over a sheaf of bills. Swallowing audibly, the man took it.

Outside the window, the darkness grew deeper.

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The night wore on, and the full moon shone like a silver dish in the deep blue sky. The visitor who’d stayed until a short time ago had left, and the mansion was hushed. Only the call of an owl echoed over the road.

The night breeze blew relentlessly over the three figures beneath the tree across from the mansion.

“Ah!” Doug cried softly. Rabi noticed at the same moment.

A figure had appeared on the other side of the Dreselle mansion’s ostentatious gate. Even through the lattice they could tell it was a large, strongly-built man. He wore a dark brown frock coat that was difficult to distinguish against the dark background.

The bearded face visible in the moonlight precisely matched that of the portrait above the fireplace.

“It’s Mr. Jerome,” whispered Doug softly.

With unbelievable agility for such a large build, Jerome placed a hand on the lattice and lightly vaulted over the six-foot-high gate. He landed soundlessly on the ground.

Jerome looked around at his surroundings two, three times and walked in the direction opposite the town—towards the forest.

The three of them quietly began trailing Jerome, who was staggering along with unsteady footsteps, like a drunken man.

At his chest, illuminated by the streetlamps, glittered the diamond.

“So that’s the diamond we heard about…it’s just as big as in the portrait,” said Rabi.

“It stands out even in the dark. It’ll make him easier to follow.” Doug let out a sigh of admiration. “However, if he runs into a thief while wearing it so openly—” he started to say, then stopped in his tracks.

After Jerome had passed by, three men leapt out from beneath a tree, cutting them off. All of them had caps pulled low over their eyes and cloth covering the lower halves of their faces. Their appearance was seedy in old coats, hempen pants, and wooden shoes, but they swelled out their chests in pride at their strength.

They were armed with knives and clubs.

“What do you guys want?”

Not replying to Rabi’s question, the men silently hefted their weapons.

Robbers? No, in that case they would have attacked Jerome, thought Rabi. *They came leaping out like they were targeting us. Clearly they were lying in wait for us.* “No way, are these guys Akuma?” Rabi glanced at the Bookman. There was no

time for indecision. “Doug, leave this to us….You go after Jerome!”

Doug nodded and ran towards the forest. More men leapt out from under the trees to block his way.

How many of them are there!? Rabi swiftly extended his hammer and leapt.

He sailed through the air and landed between the men and Doug. The mean stopped short at sight of this superhuman movement.

“Out of the way!” With a swing of Rabi’s hammer, the men went flying like balls. “Go!” Sparing a glance at Doug, who’d set off running, Rabi felt a sudden sense of foreboding. However, the risen men came in for the attack, leaving Rabi no time to ponder it.

First I’ve got to defeat these guys! Rabi shook off the uneasiness swirling darkly in the back of his mind and shifted his grip to the hammer to whirl it around.

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Luckily, Doug quickly caught up with Jerome.

Catching his breath, Doug glanced behind him. *There were at least six of those men. I wonder if Rabi and the Bookman will be all right.*

Doug quickly suppressed his anxiety. There was no way that Rabi and the Bookman, who were Exorcists, would lose to the likes of them.

Doug need only carry out the task he was assigned.

Telling himself this, Doug calmed down.

Jerome staggered along, following the road single-mindedly. At some point the houses had become sporadic, and the forest, like a great black wave, had become visible ahead. The streetlamps had vanished, and only the moon, shining brightly in the night sky, lit the path. There were no longer any other people around, and Doug heard only the voices of insects and his own footfalls.

Jerome entered the dark forest without hesitating.

Doug looked up at the dense, dark trees. The wind blew, and the trees swayed as if beckoning him on. It made Doug’s heart pound. Spooked, he trembled.

The figure of Jerome was being swallowed into a clutch of trees.

I have no choice but to go. Doug resolved himself and stepped forward.

The night forest had fallen into a silent sleep. There was nothing to disturb its slumber, only the occasional bat visible fluttering past.

Doug closed his eyes and focused his attention on his ears. Doug had passed through many scenes of bloodshed, and he knew that by closing off your other senses, you effectively sharpen a single sense.

If he listened attentively, he could make out faint footsteps.

“Over there…” Doug quickly advanced.

Presently there was a break in the trees. After pushing through a thicket of bushes, Doug emerged into a clearing.

Nothing blocked the moonlight here, and it brightly illuminated everything. In an instant, Doug saw several human figures, started in fear, and froze.

However, upon looking more closely, they were human statues. Weeds grew unchecked at the feet of the unmoving statues. In a corner was something like a stone bench.

It seemed to be the remnants of a garden.

Doug cautiously stepped into the garden. Seen up close, the statues had moss growing on them, and the smell of grass reached Doug’s nose.

They must have had a nest nearby, because bats were fluttering about here and there.

Doug, who had advanced further into the garden, hurriedly hid himself behind a statue.

Jerome was standing in front of a statue set at the heart of the garden. Like the other statues, this one, in the shape of a woman, was grown with moss.

Could that be the goddess statue we heard of?

At that moment, there was a rustling noise behind Doug. He turned sharply, and his eyes opened wide.

Colette was standing there.

“Colette!? What are you doing here?”

At Doug’s vehemence, Colette’s expression became fearful. She edged back like a cornered cat. Doug felt his heart begin to pound harder. *Why is Colette coming to the goddess statue? And so late at midnight, too. Impossible—impossible!*

Colette spoke up, “What are *you* doing here, Doug?”

“I followed Mr. Jerome.”

“The master!?”

“You’re too loud!”

Doug, panicked, put his hand over Colette’s mouth. It was not a violent movement, but Colette’s eyes clearly showed fright, and her shoulders rose in startlement. “Don’t hit me!”

“What?” Surprised, Doug looked at Colette.

Colette crouched on her heels and clutched herself with thin arms. Her slight body was trembling.

“Hit you…? How could….I’m sorry if I frightened you. But I don’t use violence, so don’t worry about…” As he was speaking, Doug noticed what looked like bruises on Colette’s wrists. “What are…”

Colette’s fearfulness—circumstances he didn’t want to consider surfaced in Doug’s mind. He knelt on one knee on the ground and gently peered into Colette’s face. “Colette, has someone been hurting you?”

Still trembling, Colette didn’t reply.

“Mr. Jerome?”

Colette shook her head from side to side emphatically.

“Impossible—Serge?”

Tears spilled from Colette’s eyes.

That man. I thought he was hiding something, but I never expected him to possess this much of a brutal side. However, looking back, Serge had shown signs of being quick to fly into a rage.

“Why is Serge hitting you!? How long has he been hurting you? And does Jerome know?”

“Since the mistress died, Master Serge started flying into rages. When he loses his temper, there’s nothing anyone can do. Master Serge was quite his mother’s boy, so I think he must have received quite a shock. He started taking out his anger on us servants…”

So that means she's been the victim of violence on a daily basis for nearly a month. I'm sure her clothing hides other bruises. Doug was gripped by an overpowering feeling of helplessness. *Why does God send us such cruel trials? Is God there? If He is—I wonder what He is thinking.*

Doug shook off these foolish thoughts. *If the likes of me starts pondering the existence of God, I'll only end up going in circles.*

"When he first hit me, I ran headlong from the mansion, and ended up here by chance."

"Really…"

For Colette, whom there was no place for in the mansion, this was a temporary refuge. Doug had been suspicious of Colette because she'd been near the goddess statue.

Doug softly stroked Colette's hair. He felt like he would cry if he didn't. "Weren't you scared, inside this dark forest?"

Surprisingly, Colette shook her head. "I'm not scared here…that goddess statue looks like my mother, you see."

At these words, Doug felt like his heart had been pierced. *That's right, she's still ten years old. Of course she misses her mother.*

Doug gently embraced Colette. Colette nervously put her arms around Doug. The girl's body was warm. And unbelievably thin.

She'd left her hometown, and was living with all her might on her own. Her unfriendliness was the armor she wrapped desperately around herself in order to protect herself.

"What are you going to do if this girl is unhappy?"

The Bookman's frank advice flitted through Doug's head, but Doug had already made his decision.

He grasped Colette's small hand and looked her in the eye. "Colette, I'll protect you from now on. Don't worry."

Colette looked faintly surprised—then her eyes grew moist. "Really?"

Doug nodded to Colette, who was looking at him imploringly. "Yes! When all this is over, I'll go speak to Jerome. I'll do something about the debt! You won't have to work in that mansion anymore."

Doug gently embraced Colette, who had leapt into his arms. He gently stroked her shaking back, again and again.

Just then, there was the rustling sound of someone pushing through a thicket. Doug, looking a few yards ahead, managed to keep from crying out. Serge had appeared there.

What's he doing here?

In front of the goddess statue, Jerome slowly turned around. "What is it, Serge? Why have you called me out here?"

"We can't talk in the mansion. There, you never know who could be listening from where." Serge's voice rang false. He seemed agitated, and even Doug could hear his heavy breathing. There was an unpleasant smile on his face, illuminated by the moonlight.

"Why did Serge call the master out to—"

"Shh." Flustered, Doug covered Colette's mouth.

"Father…have you come out to kill more people tonight?"

"What!?" At Serge's words, Doug unthinkingly raised his voice. This time, Colette put her small hand over Doug's mouth.

Fortunately, the Dreselle father and son, perhaps too intent on their conversation, showed now sign whatsoever of noticing them.

"What are you talking about?" Jerome countered calmly, completely unperturbed.

Serge slowly licked his lips. "I saw it. I've followed you when you go out at night—and seen you kill them. You've killed dozens—no, at least a hundred by now, haven't you? You've been burying them. In the forest beyond that statue. Shall I dig one up?"

Judging from Serge's confident tone, he didn't seem to be lying. *Then Jerome killed those missing people. So the Akuma is Jerome?* thought Doug.

"I…I can't believe the kind master is a murderer. But why?" whispered Colette, trembling.

Serge had taken on a triumphant tone, and his words spilled out. "If this is found out, it's all over, no matter how much of a key local personage you are. Besides, I'd rather not have my father put to death for mass murder. So, what do you say about retiring from the public eye?"

Jerome remained silent.

“You can live out the rest of your days in luxury in your villa in Orleans. Hand over your estate to me. Isn’t that a good idea? So give me that diamond pendant.” Serge extended his hand.

“Serge.” Jerome finally spoke. “I have another good way.”

“What?” Serge’s face twisted unpleasantly.

Beneath the moonlight, Jerome’s mouth split like a crescent moon.

When he saw this malicious smile, Serge’s expression grew anxious. The sinister aura of menace projected by Jerome made chills run down the spine even of Doug, who was hiding.

“I could kill you.”

“Mmf!”

Doug, who had been expecting this, swiftly put his hand over Colette’s mouth.

“Wha…what are you talking about, father?” Serge must have thought that there was no way Jerome would kill him, his own son, but now the mask of confidence was stripped from his face and a look of cowardice visible. As slow as he was, even Serge now sensed the danger to himself, and drew back step by step.

Jerome froze, and his eyes rolled back in his head, revealing their whites. His body began to tremble as if something possessed it. Doug reflexively pulled Colette close. Although Colette clung to him all the while, she kept her gaze boldly fixed on Jerome.

The awful moment when a human transforms into something inhuman was nearly upon them.

In the next instant, sharp rock-like protuberances burst from Jerome’s body as if unable to hold back any longer.

Colette gasped.

A jarring mechanical noise broke the silence of the forest—Jerome’s skin split away, and the Akuma emerged into full view.

“A Level 2 Akuma!” Doug shouted without thinking.

It resembled nothing more than a porcupine made of glass. Its four feet planted on

the ground, the Akuma's entire body was covered in sharp, translucent shafts, shaped like prisms, that looked as if they would come flying toward Doug and the others at any moment. Bathed in moonlight, the Akuma shone silver, like a gigantic crystal ore. However, this shape evoked not beauty, but fear.

"Th-the master…" Colette whispered in a trembling voice.

Doug stared at the Akuma that had cast aside its human skin and shown its true nature. Whenever Doug saw the fiendish shape of an Akuma, he was filled with horror. A hateful evil weapon, created from sacrifice of a human being and a tragedy—

Even overwhelmed by the Akuma before his eyes, Doug did not fail to notice a small rustling sound. Alertly looking towards the direction the sound had come from, he saw a man stagger into the garden. His large build and shabby clothing were familiar. It was one of the men who'd blocked their path earlier. He was bleeding from the forehead.

"Serge, they were too strong!" Having yelled this, the man saw the Akuma in the center of the garden and stopped short, quailing.

Reacting to the man's voice, the Akuma puffed out its body. The translucent shafts protruding from it took on a dangerous light.

The moment that the man, who'd realized the danger, turned heel to run, a protruding translucent shaft fired like a missile.

"Gah!" Blood flew from the man's mouth. The sharply pointed shaft, as long as a man's arm, had accurately stabbed through the man's body. The shaft sticking from him, the man fell to the ground.

"Aaaugh!" Serge screamed and rushed to hide behind a nearby statue.

The Akuma turned to survey the garden. Then, lumbering slowly, it peered between statues as if playing hide and seek.

Colette clutched at Doug's chest.

"It's all right. Rabi will be here soon, so don't worry."

"Rabi?" Colette said doubtfully.

"That's right—Rabi is an Exorcist who battles Akuma, and he's really strong." Doug recalled the sight of Rabi gracefully swinging his hammer and defeating Akuma.

"I—I don't trust him. That boy," Colette said in a rush. "He's always smiling, but only on the surface. Inside his heart, he's very cold. I'm sure it would be easy for him to

abandon others."

What a wise girl, Doug thought once more. She hadn't just been almost hit with a hammer, she'd been observing Rabi closely.

A girl who worked among adults with all her strength, who lived doing the best she could. Although young, she had naturally come to possess the sad habit of being good at reading people's expressions—just like Doug.

Of course, compared with Doug, who may have lost his parents, but had the fortune of being raised by relatives, Colette was suffering more.

"No, Rabi is sure to come," Doug declared emphatically. What Colette had said was true. However, that was not the whole of Rabi. "Rabi's come to save me when I was on the verge of death before. He's sure to come this time, too." Doug stroked Colette's hair soothingly.

Just then, he saw that the Akuma was approaching them.

Oh no, at this rate it'll find us. I have to buy time. "Colette, you hide here!" Doug sprang from behind the statue.

The Akuma's eyes swiveled to focus on him. Doug raised his arms wide to draw its attention and set off running.

Having discovered prey, the Akuma's eyes glittered, and it leapt forcefully from the ground. An air of menace, like that of a starved beast, rose from its body.

Rabi, come quickly! Doug prayed fervently while running between statues in a zigzag pattern to keep the Akuma from drawing a bead on him. *To think that when I first met him, I thought he was so untrustworthy.*

Rabi had approached with a closed heart and a smile that was only on the surface. Doug had even sensed hatred in his eyes—

A shaft shot out, and a nearby statue flew to pieces. Shaking off shards of stone, Doug kept running.

But that one time—when Doug had been chased by an Akuma and ended up alone, Rabi had come to save him, regardless of how Doug was hiding inside a building on the point of a very dangerous collapse.

I don't understand the reasons, but Rabi places distance between himself and others, a distance that he will not cross. But he does feel for others. That's why he's sure to come for us this time, too!

"Augh!"

Taking a hit from a shaft, the statue before Doug's eyes shattered. Doug, who had stopped reflexively, met eyes with Serge, who had been hiding behind it. They stood still for a moment, at a loss for words.

"Doug!" Colette came running up. She had a desperate expression, as if she'd been unable to stand hiding any longer.

"It's too dangerous, Colette, get back!"

But Colette threw herself into Doug's arms.

"Colette! What are you doing here?" yelled Serge, but at sight of the onrushing Akuma his face twisted. "Aauuugh, get away!" Serge roughly grabbed Colette's arm and dragged her away from Doug.

It happened in an instant.

"Aah!"

In spite of Colette's scream, Serge lifted her and forcibly held her towards the Akuma.

"What are you doing!?" In a panic, Doug tried to tear Serge away from Colette. However, perhaps because his life was at risk, Serge's strength was formidable, and he kept ahold of Colette.

"You're using this girl as a shield? You should be ashamed!"

"Shut up! This my servant! How I treat her is up to me!" cried Serge, froth flying from his lips. His eyes were bloodshot, his puerile and selfish inner character vividly revealed.

The Akuma's body began to glow.

"Watch out!" Half-falling, Doug threw himself in front of Colette, who was being used as a shield. He spread his arms, protecting Colette.

Will my body really hold out as a shield? Doug clenched his teeth and stared at the Akuma.

The Akuma's body shone once again.

Doug felt as if Death stood beside him, raising his scythe. He felt despair surge over him like a tidal wave.

Oh God, if you have any mercy in Your heart, at least protect this girl! Just as Doug

screamed this within his heart, a familiar voice echoed through the garden.

“Doug! Colette!”

It was like a beam of light shining through the darkness.

“Rabi!” Doug yelled from the bottom of his heart, as if driving away his despair.

He saw red hair coming towards him like a torch. Behind Rabi, the Bookman was also visible, running lightly towards them.

He did come for us! “Rabi! Be careful!”

The Akuma turned to face Rabi and the Bookman. It shot the shafts towards them one after another like missiles.

Rabi and the Bookman leapt from the ground and sailed lightly through the air. The shafts stabbed into the empty ground.

Having dodged the attack, Rabi and the Bookman touched down in front of Doug and Colette.

“Are you two okay?” asked Rabi.

“Yeah, somehow or other.” Doug felt as if he’d fall over as relief filled him.

They’d come. The only ones in the world who could defeat Akuma.

“Sorry we’re late! There were too many of those guys, so it took some work!” said Rabi.

He and the Bookman intently watched the Akuma, which planted its feet firmly in the center of the garden and let out a ferocious roar.

“A Level 2 Akuma…a formidable opponent, Rabi.” The Bookman looked at Rabi.

Rabi met his gaze and grinned. It was a trustworthy smile that kept away the slightest hint of fear. “Leave it to me! But before that…”

Rabi seized the arm of Serge, who was still using Colette as a shield. “Are you hiding behind such a small girl?” Rabi tore Serge’s arm away from Colette, then looked down coldly at him as he froze. “You’re not even worth punching.”

Released from Serge’s hold, Colette, threw herself into Doug’s arms.

“You two get away from here and hide behind a statue,” the Bookman said.

Doug nodded at the Bookman's words and took Colette's hand.

Rabi took ahold of his hammer. He swung it lightly, and all at once it became larger. "You take care of Colette!" Holding his hammer, which was now the size of his body, in one hand, Rabi advanced on the Akuma.

While grasping Colette's hand, Doug gazed at Rabi's receding figure. The same old Rabi, not showing any particular eagerness.

Seeing Rabi's unconcerned figure was enough to make Doug feel relieved. Doug let the tension leave his body.

Serge stealthily tried to flee the garden, causing the Akuma to react. Displaying a leap unimaginable for its colossal body, it blocked Serge's path.

"Aaaugh! Save me!"

Leaping between Serge and the Akuma, Rabi swung his hammer sideways. The hammer whizzed through the air, making a direct hit on the Akuma. There was a loud ringing sound, and the Akuma staggered.

"Are you okay, Serge?" Rabi asked.

Serge met him with a glare. "Wh-what are you doing here? You came for the diamond, didn't you. Godammit, I told them to kill you, the useless bastards!" Serge may have become unbalanced, for he yelled the last to himself, spittle flying.

A few centimeters from where he stood, one of the Akuma's shafts stuck out like a spear.

"Aaaah!" After a momentary silence, Serge seemed to lose his nerve completely, and let out a scream.

"So you were the one who hired those ruffians?" Rabi regarded the shaking Serge with disgust. "I don't want to save the likes of you, but unfortunately I'm an Exorcist."

Rabi hefted his hammer. "It's my job to defeat Akuma!" Rabi leapt in the direction of the Akuma, which was rushing towards him headfirst. "Hah!"

Swinging his hammer high, Rabi hit its silver body with a blow that had all his strength behind it. The Akuma went flying like a ball, taking down trees as it fell.

"Oops…"

However, there was no sign of damage as the Akuma immediately leapt up from between the trees. Rabi had felt his hammer hit. But the shafts covering its body

bore not a single scratch.

“This is sure a tough Akuma.”

The Akuma curled into a sphere like a ball and began spinning in place like a top.

“It’s coming, Rabi!”

The moment the Bookman spoke, shafts came shooting out in rapid succession from the Akuma’s body, which was spinning at a high speed. The sharp shafts rained down indiscriminately in all directions.

“Agh!” Rabi went down on one knee and used his hammer as a shield. One after another, the flying shafts hit the hammer and bounced back. Keeping himself firmly in place, Rabi desperately blocked the fearsome attacks.

The flying shafts pierced the earth to encircle Serge, who was curled in a fetal position, unable to move.

The rain of shafts stopped. The Akuma, completely bare now that it had shot all its shafts, was swaying. Sharp projections broke out from its body once more.

So it was reloading. Rabi swiftly stood. “Now it’s my turn!”

Rabi leapt with all his strength and soared high. With the light of the moon shining in the dark of the night behind him, Rabi raised his hammer high.

With a crash, the hammer hit, caving in the Akuma’s side.

A deafening roar sounded, and the Akuma crashed into the earth. The ground split, creating a vast crater, as if a meteorite had fallen.

As clouds of dust rose up, Rabi grinned and touched down. “That’s about it.”

“Fool!” came the Bookman’s voice sharply.

Rabi realized that the Akuma was no longer in the center of the crater.

“Above you!”

The moment Rabi looked up, he received a dull blow to the face. The bandanna around his head was torn off, and Rabi was slammed into the ground.

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“Rabi!”

Rabi having sustained an attack from the Akuma's sharp claws, remained prone. The Bookman seized Doug's arm firmly when he tried to run up to Rabi. "Those who are not Exorcists must not get involved in battles with Akuma!"

Doug looked at the Bookman sharply. "But I can't just leave him to die!" It was clear to anyone that Doug was prepared for death.

"The panda's right…leave this to me."

"Rabi!"

Rabi stood up unsteadily. A trickle of blood was running from his forehead. "It's surprisingly agile considering how heavy its body looks. I got caught off-guard." Licking the blood that ran from his mouth, Rabi lifted his hammer once more. A seriousness, foreign to the Rabi who was always cracking jokes, filled his expression. A tension surrounded him, a tension that seemed as if it would burst forth if one touched him.

Doug swallowed.

"So you've finally started concentrating, foolish pupil," murmured the Bookman.

"Big hammer, small hammer." Rabi stopped his hammer short. "Grow, grow—"

Reacting to his words, the hammer became enveloped by light. A dull vibration resounded.

Rabi spoke slowly. "Grow."

The instant the word left his mouth, the hammer grew yet larger.

"Whoah!" A cry involuntarily escaped Doug's lips.

It was a remarkable scene. The hammer, wreathed in light, was now the size of a house. Rabi, who had about the same build as Doug, was holding it easily. At this extraordinary sight, not only Colette, but Doug, who had seen Rabi fight before, held their breath.

"Now then, can you withstand this one?"

When it saw Rabi's hammer, the Akuma gradually gathered the crystals covering its body into one, leaving its legs visible. The crystals became a single giant shaft with a sharp point.

Rabi regarded the Akuma, which looked like a strange unicorn. "A contest of strength? Just what I wanted."

Rabi leapt.

He lifted his hammer to meet the Akuma, which was heading straight towards him.

“Aaaugh!” Swung like a bat, the hammer collided violently with the Akuma.

With a crumbling sound, cracks appeared in the Akuma’s body.

“This is the end!” Rabi hit the now-unmoving Akuma with his hammer.

Riing—with a clear and beautiful sound of destruction, the Akuma’s crystal went flying into pieces. Rabi gave a victorious smile.

The transparent shards scattered, reflecting the light of the moon. At this fantastic sight, like wildly dancing silver butterflies, even the crouching Serge was captivated, his mouth open.

It seemed that Serge, miraculously, was safe despite having been in the middle of such a fierce battle.

He has the devil’s own luck. It’s true what they say about ill weeds flourishing, thought Rabi.

“Rabi! You did it!” Pulling Colette along by the hand, Doug came running up.

:Hey, Colette, were you okay?” asked Rabi.

“Yes. Doug protected me, so I was fine.” Colette looked up at Doug with eyes full of trust.

Rabi put a hand to his head. “Man, this sappy love talk is hurting me the most!”

Doug tightly hugged the wryly smiling Rabi.

Rabi was a little surprised by the fervent embrace of Doug, usually so reserved. “Whoa, Doug, aren’t you hugging the wrong person?”

“Thank you. Because you and the Bookman came for us, Colette and I are still alive. I’m truly grateful.” Doug’s arms tightened around Rabi.

Doug’s honest feelings of gratitude slowly filled Rabi along with his warmth. Rabi patted Doug’s back. “I’m an Exorcist. Taking care of Akuma is my job.”

“Will your wound be all right?” Pulling back, Doug put a hand to Rabi’s forehead.

“Yeah, it’s just a scratch.”

“But to defeat a Level 2 Akuma so easily…that’s amazing, Rabi.”

“Not really, they’re pretty easy.” As Rabi swelled out his chest, the Bookman hit his head from behind. “Ow!”

“Don’t get carried away, you amateur!”

“Now, now, Bookman. He did defeat it, after all.”

The Bookman snorted at Doug’s intercession. “He’s too soft! And he slipped up!”

At that moment, Rabi stepped on something hard. Looking closely, he saw that it was a silver chain. Around it, glittering shards of diamond were scattered.

It was the pendant that Jerome had been wearing. It appeared that when Rabi had defeated the Akuma, the pendant had shattered along with it.

“Well, let’s go back.” Rabi patted Doug’s shoulder.

“Rabi.”

Rabi turned at the voice calling his name. Colette was staring up at him intently.

“That’s the first time you’ve called me by name, Colette. What’s wrong?”

“I was thinking that it’s just like Doug said. You’ll come for sure. And you’ll defeat the Akuma, he said.”

Rabi looked at Doug in surprise. Doug gave a carefree smile.

“Thank you, Rabi,” said Colette.

At her words, Rabi threw his chest out shamelessly. “Indeed. Try to be properly grateful!” he said with great exaggeration, trying to make a joke of it. The complete trust Colette and Doug showed in him caused some warm emotion to well up unexpectedly, and he was trying to hide it. “Now then, let’s go!”

The four of them, with Rabi in the lead, left the forest with its flying bats behind them.

“Rabi!”

As Rabi walked through the wide halls of the Order, the Science Division Chief Komui Lee called out to him.

Komui was a tall man who wore glasses. He had an intelligent and gentle air, but his sharp eyes gave the impression that he could be difficult to deal with.

“What?” Rabi turned around, and upon seeing his face, Komui took on a puzzled expression.

“What happened? What are you smiling about?”

“Nothing, it’s only that I just heard a new Exorcist joined?”

“Oh, do you mean Allen?” Behind his glasses, Komui’s eyes took on an amused light.

“What’s he like?”

“He looks like mild-mannered boy, but he’s strong at heart.”

Rather like Doug, then. “He’s not at the Order right now, is he? That’s too bad.”

“That’s right, I sent him out on a mission to the ‘Rewinding Town.’ I think we’ll be seeing him again.”

“By the way, did you have something to tell me?”

“Yes—I was informed that Doug arrived at the underground canal a short while ago.”

“I see,” said Rabi. Already a week had passed since the incident. Rabi and the Bookman had returned to the Order the next morning ahead of Doug, who as a Finder remained behind to settle things. “I have to go meet with him later. I want to ask him about Colette, too.”

“What’re you talking about,” asked Komui.

“Oh, nothing, just talking to myself.”

Rabi couldn’t help grinning. What expression had Doug, so awkward around girls, had when he’d handed over her gift? Rabi wanted to hear all the details.

Rabi returned to the room prepared for him inside the Order. He was often outside the Order, and the room, used only for sleeping when he did stay at the Order, was simple, holding only a bed and a table. However, it was spacious, and didn’t feel cramped even though Rabi shared it with the Bookman.

I wonder what Doug will do now. Sprawled out on the bed, Rabi thought back to the events of a week before.

He recalled the words of Colette, whom Rabi had accompanied back to the mansion after defeating the Akuma. “Doug says he’ll pay my debt. We may to be able to live

together, but he told me he'll always protect me." It was the first heartfelt smile of happiness Rabi had seen from Colette.

"…"

Rabi lay face up on the bed. He had become completely used to the cold and imposing air of his room, in which he had at first felt somehow out of place.

Rabi realized that he felt at home.

"I've been here awhile, too…"

It had been two years since he'd joined the Black Order. Until now, he'd wandered through many places with the Bookman. However, they'd never stayed in one place this long before.

Doug, Komui, Linali, Kanda, Reever—the faces of the Order members appeared in his mind one after the other.

With an iron will, Rabi suppressed the feeling not unlike homesickness that welled up in his heart. He mustn't get the wrong idea. This was nothing more than a temporary lodging to which he belonged for the moment in order to record the hidden side of history. He mustn't become unnecessarily involved emotionally.

"Who are you?"

The question he'd repeated to himself hundreds, thousands of times.

I'm the Bookman's successor. *All I do is behold history with the eyes of an impartial observer and copy it down. Interfering with the actors is out of the question.*

Rabi slowly closed his eyes. Anyone looking at Rabi at that moment would have been surprised by his expression, like that of a different person than the usual upbeat Rabi. The desolation etching Rabi's face was that deep. His usual lightheartedness and cheerfulness were hidden away, and there was a hardness to him that others would not likely approach.

"Aaaugh!"

A heart-stopping scream reached Rabi's ears, and he leapt from bed. It was a death cry, like those Rabi had heard countless times before.

The headquarters of the Black Order was a secure stronghold protected by a gatekeeper. This shouldn't be happening in such a safe place.

Rabi, dashing out of his room, exchanged glances with the Order members who had also run out into the hall. "Where'd it come from?"

“I don’t know!” But it should be around here—”

Rabi turned a corner of the hallway and caught his breath.

“Gah…” Rabi’s face contorted at the horrific sight. There was a pool of blood in the hall, and bloody Order members had collapsed over each other.

There was no sign of anyone with intent to kill. It seemed that the attacker had already fled.

For a moment, Rabi hesitated, but he’d passed through countless scenes of bloodshed before. Quickly regaining his calm, he carefully touched the body of a fallen Order member.

There was no pulse. There was a large hole in the man’s back. This must have proved a fatal wound. He had been pierced with something sharp and thick, like a stake.

A killer inside the Order? Impossible, an Akuma?

An image of the Akuma in Jerome’s body, which had been like a crystal ore, appeared in Rabi’s mind. The wound looked precisely as if the man had been stabbed with one of its crystal projectiles.

Impossible…I thought I defeated it. Besides, outsiders have to pass through the gatekeeper’s x-ray inspection to enter the Order. Akuma can’t enter.

Then who did this? Rabi looked over the dreadful scene again. It didn’t look like the work of a human being—

“Inform Komui at once!” Rabi told a nearby Order member, and looked farther down the hall.

Bloody footprints continued through the hall. Rabi followed the bloody tracks cautiously.

Turning a corner in the hall, Rabi drew a sharp breath. Another Order member was lying covered in blood.

“Are you all right?” When Rabi ran up to him and lifted him in his arms, the man opened his eyes slightly. His face was ghastly pale—it looked as if his wound was lethal. “I’ll call the Medical Division right now, so hang in there!”

The man’s lips trembled. “Doug…”

“What?”

“Doug went…that way…” Blood spilled from the man’s mouth.

“Don’t talk!”

The moment Rabi spoke, the man’s head drooped. Rabi expressed his grief by quietly closing his eyes, but soon he stood. His pulse was racing.

The man had said “Doug.”

Rabi looked down the hall. Surely Doug’s room was this way! He imagined Doug dead and covered in blood, and hurriedly thrust the awful thought away.

“Doug!” Rabi started running.

He’s always so impractical. When we were working together on a mission a year ago, too, he used himself as a decoy in order to save a fellow Finder who was injured and got left behind.

Rabi’s breathing grew rough. *Where’s the old man? All the other Exorcists have been sent out, I have to do it!*

The door to Doug’s room was open. Rabi dashed inside.

A large open window—a young man was alone on the balcony outside. He was wearing a white uniform. He had black hair and a familiar stature.

“Doug?”

Doug slowly turned around when Rabi spoke. His white uniform was spattered with blood. He saw Rabi and smiled in relief. “Rabi! Thank goodness. I was attacked by a strange man, and I barely managed to escape with my life! I thought I was done for.”

Rabi froze, unable to speak. Despair slowly filled his body like cold black water.

He didn’t want to believe it. But he couldn’t avert his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Rabi?” Doug approached Rabi, looking puzzled.

Rabi slowly shook his head. “You once said to me that you can know a person by the light in their eyes. I…finally understand.”

Doug was watching him with a stupefied look on his face.

“You acknowledged me as a single human being, and treated me as one—”

As he watched Doug, who nodded, an inexpressible sadness welled up inside Rabi.

“But now…” Rabi quietly gripped the shaft of his hammer. “They’re the empty eyes of a machine!”

Rabi swung his hammer, sending it tearing through the air. Doug lightly dodged the hammer’s fierce attack, leaping nimbly out of its path.

There was no way the usually slow Doug could have managed such a feat. It was painful for Rabi to admit this, even though he knew it was true.

Touching down lightly on the broad balcony like a cat, Doug smirked. It was a coarse smile that Rabi had never seen on Doug before.

“Doug. You killed them all, didn’t you.”

There was no gatekeeper at the locks in the underground canal. That was how an Akuma had snuck in without being noticed. Yes, it all fit together.

“Too bad…I’d planned to kill the people here a few at a time and destroy the Black Order completely. I was found out earlier than I’d expected.” It was a black bat flying around next to Doug that spoke. On close inspection, the bat’s head was in the shape of skull. Clearly, it was no normal bat.

“What the hell are you!?”

“I’m the Earl’s messenger, Dobie. Well, you could say I keep watch.” Dobie’s mouth gaped open. There was a row of sharp fangs inside.

Wings flapping, Dobie bared his fangs and attacked Rabi.

“Gah!” Rabi turned away from Dobie, who had headed for his face, and somehow managed to dodge. Dobie turned easily in midair and came towards Rabi again. His mouth twisted in a sneer. “Now then, show him your power!”

A creaking noise echoed through the air. A strong tremor ran through Doug’s body. Something dark gray, resembling wings of iron, sprouted from Doug’s back. They quietly enveloped Doug’s body from behind. His arms and legs, too, became covered by something like iron. The substances had become a single suit of armor. On Doug’s head was an iron mask.

Doug thrust out his hand, and a round shield and long pike emerged from the armor.

It was as if he bore the trappings of a knight.

Cold eyes glinted from a gap in the mask. Its armaments, its clear sense of self—it

was an Akuma that had evolved to Level 2.

Each time an Akuma killed someone, it grew higher in level as a weapon.

How could he become an Akuma and kill so many people in the mere space of a week!? Knowing it was useless, Rabi couldn't help screaming, "What happened, Doug!?"

He couldn't believe it. Rabi had defeated the Akuma, and they were supposed to have completed the mission without any lose ends. Why, then, had Doug become an Akuma? If Doug was its skin, that meant Doug had called back someone who'd died.

Why would someone in the Black Order, who ought to know full well its futility and frightfulness, do such a thing!?

"He went to the Statue of the Dawn Goddess, this one did!" Dobie said, laughing. "That little girl died, and, clutching at straws, he tried to cause a miracle!"

"Wha…"

Not letting the opening left by the shocked Rabi pass, the knight thrust his spear.

"Gah!" Pushing off from the balcony floor, Rabi leapt far out of the way. "Are you talking about Colette!? Did Colette die!? Why!?"

"That foolish son of the man who'd turned into an Akuma suspected her of stealing the diamond pendant. The foolish son strangled her to death with an excess of force!" said Dobie as it fidgeted its flapping wings.

The diamond that Rabi had smashed along with the Akuma.

"There is no God—no need for one. No need—none," came a muffled voice. The knight approached with a heavy clunking sound. A despairing voice that sounded like a curse could be heard from the iron mask.

Dobie regarded the knight with enjoyment. "Heheh…the winds of despair are blowing through the world. We will make this rotten world anew."

"Destroy, destroy, destroy, destroy—destroy—" from the slot in the iron mask, two brilliantly glowing eyes held Rabi.

Colette—the ill-fortuned girl who had finally opened her heart to Doug. Killed for an unfounded crime, then dragged back into this world, the girl's soul must have been torn to pieces.

How painful it must have been when she was killed. When she was called to heaven

at long last, she was called back and turned into and Akuma—how she must have suffered.

Colette's soul had been broken, then bound by chains. Words would no longer reach her.

Rabi gazed at the hatred-filled eyes of the Akuma with unbearable emotion.

"You so-called apostles of God who were so crafty at first—I'll slaughter you all! Go!"

As if triggered by Dobie's voice, the knight began to shout. "Die die die die die—!!"

A knight boiling with hatred and brimming with the urge to kill.

Doug, you never wanted this tragedy.

You idiot. I never even trusted my heart to you. But you trusted me so much.

Idiot. What an idiot, to die so soon.

The events that unfolded after he'd returned to the Black Order surfaced in the back of Rabi's mind. Doug, hurrying to Colette with a white ribbon in his hand. His heart was surely leaping as he imagined Colette's overjoyed face.

But what he'd seen was Colette lying on her side, no longer breathing. What had Doug thought when he lifted her small corpse and set out towards the forest, clinging to a ray of hope?

There is no God—that's what he must have thought.

Doug must have cried out in front of the Statue of the Dawn Goddess. Cried out Colette's name countless times, feeling as if he were coughing up blood. Betting on a one-in-a-thousand chance.

Doug had been a boy who approached everything earnestly, kindly, clumsily. At times he was so compassionate it verged on weakness.

"Idiot…you're really an idiot." Rabi silently closed his eye. "The statue of the Dawn Goddess was a rumor spread by the Earl to take advantage of the feelings of people who'd lost their loved ones, wasn't it."

"Yeah, that's right. It's a trap to draw out foolish humans!" Dobie said proudly, drifting now to the right, now to the left.

That's right, Serge had said the fortune-teller had a bat with him. And there had been a lot of bats flying around in the forest. The Earl's servant Dobie must have

been among them.

Rabi slowly opened his eye. *I will defeat him. And Doug and Colette, who have become an Akuma, too.*

An aura that burned like flame rose from Rabi's body. The sight of him was enough to make one's will falter, enough to make a chill run down the spines of his enemies.

However, speaking triumphantly, Dobie didn't notice. "He's killed so many people in merely the space of a week, and is now superb Level 2 Akuma. Look, his—"

"Shut up."

Dobie noticed Rabi's rage-filled eye, like a crimson flame, too late. Rabi's hammer flickered—Dobie's body burst open and went flying. Rabi spun his mallet once and hefted it again.

There was a heavy metallic sound as the knight hefted his pike. The sinister weapon that had taken the lives of countless Order members was pointed straight at Rabi.

This isn't Doug. It's an Akuma, Rabi told himself. *And I'm an Exorcist. One who defeats Akuma.* "Big hammer, small hammer, grow-grow-grow!" He activated his Innocence, and his hammer grew huge in the space of an instant.

Hammer in hand, Rabi faced the knight. "Hah!"

Rabi swung his hammer in a wide arc, but the knight blocked the attack with his shield. He swung the shield around.

Sent flying along wit the shield, Rabi somersaulted in midair and somehow managed to land.

"How about this!" Rabi faced the head of the hammer downward and held onto the hilt. "Extend, extend!" The hilt lengthened, and Rabi renewed his grip on the hammer.

"Take this!" Rabi attacked the knight by smashing him from above—or tried to. However, the hammer embedded itself into the wall.

The knight dodged it by a hair. Level 2 Akuma were more than just show. They were not only heavily equipped, but sharp-witted.

"Damn!"

The knight raised his pike and charged at Rabi.

In the knight, Rabi saw Doug.

He collided with me head-on, telling me to truly look at him when I spoke to him.

When Rabi came back to himself with a start, the knight was right in front of him.

I can't dodge! Taking a fierce blow, Rabi went flying.

He impacted the wall and hit the floor. "Ugh…"

A sharp pain shot through his back, but Rabi managed to breathe out. He was assaulted by a pain that felt like he was vomiting up all his innards.

He'd somehow managed to guard himself from the head of the pike, but he'd taken the attack's fearsome power head-on.

Standing up shakily, Rabi saw the Bookman, who had approached him at some point. The Bookman did not come running up to Rabi, just fixed him with a cold gaze.

"Who are you?"

I am the Bookman's successor. Belonging nowhere, my heart unmoved…

The knight came for Rabi once more.

"Come on!" Rabi gripped his hammer and ran towards the knight. There was a sharp clang as the pike and hammer crossed. Neither the knight nor Rabi retreated a single step, and the grueling test of strength began.

The usual voice echoed in the back of Rabi's head.

"What are Akuma?"

Akuma are malevolent weapons created by the Earl."

The knight's strength gradually increased. Rabi gritted his teeth.

"What are Exorcists?"

Those who prevent the evil aspirations of the Millennium Earl, who is trying to destroy the world. Those who use Innocence to defeat Akuma.

Rabi could see the two eyes shining blue from the gap in the iron mask. Eyes the same blue as Doug's—

I will ask you this once. Who are you?

I am the Bookman's successor! That's why I don't become attached to others. I don't care about Doug! It doesn't bother me! Forget it! Forget it!

I'm an Exorcist too. Defeating the Akuma in front of me is my work! That isn't Doug! This has nothing to do with Doug!!

"Uwaaaaaagh!!" Breaking the impasse, Rabi swung his hammer, the knight his pike. The instant Rabi felt his hammer hit, a sharp pain ran through his cheek. Rabi had just barely dodged the pike's attack. Any slower and the flesh of his cheek would have been sliced off.

I feel something wet on my cheek. Guess I'm bleeding. But it's just a scratch. Nothing serious. Rabi strengthened his grip on the hammer.

Rabi hadn't realized. The wetness on his cheek wasn't blood, it was tears.

The Bookman merely watched silently over Rabi.

Rabi stretched his hand holding the hammer up, as if trying to reach the heavens. "I'll settle this!"

Around the hammer raised high, a shape like a round seal surfaced and began to spin around the hammer. Inside the seals were the signs for Fire, Water, and other elements.

Rabi's memories of his times with Doug crossed his mind.

Doug when I first met him. The way he saw through my false smile and gave me a cold glance.

Doug when we fought together. He went running off all by himself, drawing away an Akuma in order to save a companion in danger. I can still remember it clearly. How I ran into a crumbling building to save him. Doug's look of surprise when I found him —and how it changed to a look filled with trust.

And Doug when I met him a year later. Doug, who looked straight at me. Doug, who worried about Colette. Doug, who ran up and hugged me.

The memories became a flood, and they began to whirl through Rabi's mind. He wanted to scream until his throat burst.

Rabi trembled violently. *Doug!* He concentrated all of his will on shutting away his memories of Doug.

Rabi planted his feet firmly and cried loudly, "Innocence, second release—seal!" He hit one of the seals, Fire, that spun around his hammer. "Fire Stamp!" The sign for

fire appeared on the side of Rabi's hammer.

Rabi leapt high and brought the hammer down as hard as he could on the floor. A Fire Seal ten meters in diameter appeared there and began to glow.

"Raging Flames—Fire Seal." The moment Rabi quietly recited this, an enormous pillar of flame roared upwards from the knight's feet.

The raging pillar of flame enveloped the knight's body in an instant. The flame became a snake that swallowed up the knight, making it tremble violently, and burnt it to ash.

Doug and Colette's tragedy became dust.

The instant the Akuma vanished, Rabi thought he saw Colette's face for a moment.

Rabi quietly closed his eye. He was shaking—a deep weariness oppressed him, and he knelt on the floor. Each time he breathed, an awful pain assaulted him. He could only moan at the wounds deep in his body—no, in his heart.

Clenching his fists and suppressing the pain, Rabi noticed that a white ribbon lay at his feet. Rabi silently picked it up.

It was a lace ribbon as light as down. It was like a symbol of the ephemeral life of the girl who was supposed to have received it. And the life of the one who would have given it to her.

An eleven-year-old girl and an eighteen-year-old boy had been lost forever. Neither of them would ever smile at him again. He couldn't even meet them—

Rabi somehow managed to swallow down the hot, bitter lump that rose like bile from the bottom of his heart.

"Rabi." The Bookman silently approached.

"What."

"Well done."

Rabi silently nodded at his master's words of praise. In the corner of his eye, a track left by tears remained.

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The next morning, Rabi sat on the bed, blankly waiting for the Bookman's return. Komui had called the Bookman to his office.

Some period of time must have passed. There was a knock, and Komui and the

Bookman entered the room.

“Thank you for your work yesterday. Thanks to you, we escaped with few casualties.”

“Yeah…” Although he nodded at Komui’s words, Rabi did not smile.

Komui noticed that Rabi was holding a white ribbon. “What’s that?”

“Oh.” Rabi looked like he’d noticed the ribbon for the first time. “It’s…one of Doug’s things.” He smiled faintly. It was a smile to rend the heart of anyone who saw it. “I’m going to go place it on the grave of the one who should have it.”

“I see.” Komui quietly dropped his gaze. “Doug was an excellent Finder. What happened was unfortunate, truly.”

“Can’t be helped. This is war.”

Komui widened his eyes in surprise for a moment at Rabi’s seemingly detached words. “I apologize for asking when you’re so worn out, but I want you to go along on the next job.”

“Where to this time?”

“The Rewinding Town in Germany.”

“All right.” *I don’t care where we’re going. I’m the Bookman’s successor, after all.*

At his side, the Bookman was watching him with piercing eyes.

Don’t become emotionally involved with others any more than necessary, don’t interfere—

We are the observers of history.

That is the law which is the fate of those who will become Bookman.

That’s what his eyes told Rabi.

Rabi averted his eyes from the Bookman’s.

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Combing a hand through his flame-like red hair, the boy closed his eye not covered by an eyepatch.

In an instant, the darkness arrived.

In the pitch-black, lightless world, a grave voice asked:

“Who are you?”

The one who will succeed the Bookman.

“Who is the Bookman?”

The Bookman walks through the world, pursuing history.

“What must a Bookman be like?”

Like a gust of wind. The wind doesn’t stay in one place. It feels nothing for the places it’s passed through. It just keeps wandering—

“I will ask you this once. Who are you?”

I am the Bookman’s successor. My current name—

—Rabi.

THE END

When I started translating Rabi's story, I never imagined I'd finish it. But somehow I did. Thank you, everyone, for your comments and support!